

VZCZCXRO5668
PP RUEHCHI RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHHI #1935/01 3181007
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 141007Z NOV 07
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6707
INFO RUEHVS/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH PRIORITY 3942
RHEHNSC/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 001935

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IRF, AND DRL/AWH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/13/2032
TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: HANOI REACTION TO USCIRF VISIT

HANOI 00001935 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Michael W. Michalak for Reasons 1.4 (b), (c),
and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The recent visit to Vietnam by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has generated strong negative reactions within certain circles of the GVN. GVN criticism has centered primarily on what was widely considered inappropriate behavior by USCIRF members in their meeting with Prime Minister Dung and in southern Vietnam. Internally, those who gave the USCIRF carte blanche to meet with dissidents and imprisoned political activists, including those with no clear religious connections, are scrambling to bolster their flanks. Democracy activists and religious figures do not report any increased police harassment following their meetings with the USCIRF delegation. The long-term impact of the visit in Vietnam will hinge to some degree on how Hanoi assesses the public report of the Commission. The overall state of United States-Vietnam ties, and even the tenor of Hanoi-Beijing ties, however, will also be taken into account. Overall, Hanoi's decision to adopt an "open door" policy with the USCIRF visit reflects Vietnam's heightened sensitivity to increased United States and international criticism of Vietnam following the early 2007 crackdown on dissent. Mission Vietnam will continue to focus GVN attention on the costs of that crackdown and the benefits of improved behavior. A similar reaction cable covering the delegation's Southern Vietnam visit will be reported septel. End Summary.

BACKGROUND

¶2. (SBU) Six USCIRF Commissioners, accompanied by two staff members, visited Vietnam October 21-November 1, with some arriving later and others departing earlier, on a trip to evaluate the state of religious freedom in Vietnam. In Hanoi, USCIRF Chairman Michael Cromartie, Vice Chairwoman Preeta Bansal and Commissioners Donald Argue, Felice Gaer, and Imam Talal Eid held meetings from October 21-24 with top government and religious leaders, as well as with prisoners, family members of prisoners, and dissidents. Key central government meetings included a one-hour meeting with Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, and separate meetings with MFA Vice Minister Pham Binh Minh, Ministry of Public Security (MPS) Vice Minister Nguyen Van Huong, Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) Chairman Nguyen The Doanh and meetings with the National Assembly (NA). In Ho Chi Minh City, the delegation was joined by Commissioner Leonard Leo and met, from October 24-27, with Protestant, Hoa Hao and Cao Dai religious

leaders, local government and Party leaders, house church members, dissidents and members of the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). A smaller delegation held similar meetings in Hue (October 28), the Central Highlands (October 29-30) and Soc Trang in the Mekong Delta (October 31-November 1).

USCIRF APPROACH CONSISTENT WITH GVN

¶3. (SBU) In all their meetings with GVN officials, USCIRF members pressed for information on alleged police and prison abuses of religious followers, cited apparent cases of religion-based official discrimination in the educational system, questioned the government's outlawing of the UBCV, and criticized Vietnam for having an antiquated, national security-obsessed legal system and criminal code. GVN officials consistently pointed to progress made on religious freedom, admitted that "there was still work to be done," and encouraged a continued dialogue with USCIRF and others in order to further clarify problems and "reduce differences."

¶4. (SBU) GVN interlocutors, clearly briefed to remain collegial and cooperative, sometimes struggled in responding to the issues raised by USCIRF commissioners, but generally remained upbeat in tone. Sparks flew, however, in USCIRF's meeting with the Prime Minister. After hearing specific questions of the commissioners, including about detained dissidents, the PM asked testily how the United States could "lecture Vietnam" on human rights given the use by the United States of Agent Orange and the legacy of 2.1 million Vietnamese war dead and 300,000 Vietnamese MIA. Regaining his composure, the PM ended by saying that the GVN remains open to discussing its differences with the USG.

¶5. (SBU) According to MFA contacts, after his meeting, the Prime Minister called the MFA to complain about the "in the

HANOI 00001935 002.2 OF 003

weeds" questions of the group and its aggressive style, making clear that he was upset at being asked to interact with the group. MFA Vice Minister Le Cong Phung, now Vietnam's Ambassador to the United States, later told Ambassador Michalak that USCIRF's raising of specific cases of political dissidents, in particular, was seen as inappropriate and that the USCIRF "went too far" in critiquing Vietnam's domestic practices in that meeting. MFA America's Department Acting Director General Nguyen Ba Hung said the visit - and particularly the conduct of the delegation in its meeting with the Prime Minister - had left an "extremely negative" impression on the GVN. Vice Minister of Public Security Nguyen Van Huong, who orchestrated the overall positive reception of the group, complained via subordinates that USCIRF should have "saved the specifics for him," and focused on broader issues at the head of government level.

¶6. (SBU) Following USCIRF's meeting with the Prime Minister, the National Assembly Foreign Affairs Committee reportedly held a closed hearing at which GVN officials were grilled about the visit; the view expressed by many was that, while Vietnam's relations with China can be managed, "there is no satisfying" the United States on Human Rights.

¶7. (SBU) Various sources report that MPS Vice Minister Huong faces domestic criticism for being the official who gave the delegation full access to all political and religious activists they wanted to see. Huong asked Ambassador Michalak for an urgent meeting on November 9, at which the Vice Minister was visibly perturbed because of the USCIRF visit. Huong told the Ambassador that MPS had cooperated with the Embassy's requests to allow USCIRF access to dissidents and prisoners, and now "worried" about what the USCIRF was going to say about Vietnam in its pending report.

NO FALLOUT SO FAR FOR THOSE WHO MET WITH USCIRF

¶8. (C) As noted in septels, the USCIRF delegation met with several dissidents, family members of prisoners and high-profile prisoners Nguyen Van Dai and Le Thi Cong Nhan at a jail outside Hanoi. It appears that none of our dissident or family member contacts has faced arrest since their meetings with USCIRF, although a couple were questioned by police after meeting with USCIRF, and we believe they will likely face additional scrutiny and police interrogation.

¶9. (C) The mother of Le Thi Cong Nhan, with whom USCIRF met, complained to us about a news article on USCIRF's meeting with MPS in which the delegation told MPS that family members have told us they cannot transmit anything to Dai and Nhan in prison. She said she never told the USCIRF members this, and she is concerned the prison may now make visiting her daughter more difficult.

¶10. (C) Leaders of the Catholic Church and Northern Vietnam's leading Protestant organization, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN), also reported no problems following their meetings with USCIRF. Both told USCIRF that though problems remained, the situation for their worshippers had improved significantly over the last three years. The Archbishop of Hanoi also told USCIRF that Father Nguyen Van Ly was arrested for political acts, rather than religious activities, and had strayed from church regulations on political activism. Similarly, the ECVN President disavowed former ECVN member and Protestant Lawyer Nguyen Van Dai saying bluntly he was a Bloc 8406 democracy activist.

COMMENT: GVN CLEARLY CONCERNED, BUT IMPACT UNCERTAIN

¶11. (C) During a November 1 lunch with the Ambassador, Vice Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh said that the GVN does not want USCIRF to "destroy efforts" to develop overall Vietnam-United States relations by speaking ill of Vietnam. While officials here hope that their "anything goes" approach towards USCIRF results in a positive assessment of the state of religious freedom, they now clearly understand that chances of an unambiguously positive report are nil. In dealing with USCIRF, however, Hanoi has demonstrated that it understands the limits of its ability to influence international opinion in the current climate, and also the costs of thuggish behavior. This sensitivity was lacking in their dealings, in April this year, with relatives of dissidents invited to meet with Representative Loretta Sanchez at the Ambassador's Residence. In that case, allowing the meetings to occur would have clearly been much less damaging to Vietnam's image than the thuggish behavior

HANOI 00001935 003.2 OF 003

which prevented that meeting from taking place. In this regard, the USCIRF visit was a test of current GVN thinking on its basic approach to "human rights diplomacy." Indeed, in recent months, the GVN has proven itself much more sensitive to international opinion. A months-long press campaign to highlight advances in religious freedom is underway, which includes not only press stories in Vietnam, but trips by high-ranking Committee on Religious Affairs and Ministry of Public Security officials to Washington. End comment.
MICHALAK